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Eighteenth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 381st MEETING

Held at Headquarters, New York,
on Wednesday, 4 February 1998, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Ms. KHAN

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The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

IMPLEMENTATION OF ARTICLE 21 OF THE CONVENTION (continued)

1. Ms. HEYZER (Director, United Nations Development Fund for Women) said that in the context of United Nations reform and the emphasis on greater collaboration between the various components of the United Nations system, it was important to place women's rights at the forefront of the development agenda. The ratification and implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was at the centre of the strategy for ensuring women's rights on the threshold of the new millennium. Norms and standards had been set at the international level; the present challenge was to ensure implementation at the national level.

2. Owing to the tireless advocacy efforts of women's human rights groups, the international community had recognized that women's rights were an integral part of human rights. Accountability was now required to ensure that rhetoric was transformed into action.

3. For the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was a critical tool. UNIFEM was uniquely positioned in the United Nations system to promote its ratification and implementation. As an innovative and catalytic operational entity, the Fund had regional programme advisers who were frequently called upon to act as brokers and facilitators between women's organizations, national governments and agencies and funds of the United Nations system. UNIFEM had pledged to promote the Convention at every opportunity. Ten further gender advisers were being added with the goal of establishing a field presence in over 100 countries.

4. UNIFEM recognized that the task of transforming social values and creating a culture of respect for women's rights was a lengthy process. The Fund's strategies and activities had been carefully developed on the basis of 20 years' experience with a view to promoting the realization of women's civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights, and to supporting and encouraging efforts to promote the elimination of all forms of violence against women.

5. The Fund would continue to provide technical assistance, strengthen the capacity of women's groups and facilitate the exchange of information between the Committee and non-governmental organizations. It would also act as a bridge to Governments. At the national level, UNIFEM was working closely with other funds and agencies in the United Nations system. It had developed an Arabic-language advocacy kit on the Convention and integrated a substantial component on the Convention into a project involving the curriculum in selected Caribbean schools and the media. In South America, UNIFEM had integrated the Convention into training programmes for human rights advocates and members of the judiciary. In India, through the efforts of the Fund, the Convention had been used as a framework for a landmark legal judgement. In the Asia-Pacific region, the Fund intended to support a major effort by non-governmental organizations to launch a subregional project designed to track activities leading to the successful implementation of the Convention and the Beijing Platform for Action.

In West Africa, the Fund had launched a wide-ranging programme on women's rights which would utilize the Convention in awareness-raising activities.

6. Following a successful pilot project in 1997, UNIFEM had continued its partnership with International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia-Pacific by holding a training workshop that had brought together 25 women from 13 countries. The workshop had involved an intensive three-day orientation on the Convention followed by a mentoring component, which had included a week of observing the Committee in session. The purpose had been to strengthen understanding of the Convention by women's rights advocates and to illustrate how the Committee's working methods applied to their advocacy work at the national level. Another goal had been to raise awareness among women's non-governmental organizations of the importance of the Committee's work and their participation in the monitoring and implementation of the Convention.

7. The results of the workshop were plain to see. Participants had increased their knowledge of the potential uses of the Convention. More information had been submitted to the Committee at the current session by non-governmental organizations. All the participants had developed plans for integrating the Convention into their ongoing advocacy initiatives on women's rights. Committee members and participants had benefited greatly from the opportunity for interaction. Government representatives from reporting States had forged new relationships with some of the workshop participants and arranged for follow-up national dialogue. For its part, UNIFEM was determined to continue the annual training workshop, and its support for the Committee in the task of advancing women's enjoyment of all human rights.

8. Ms. SCHÖPP-SCHILLING said that the countries in transition in Central and Eastern Europe were in a special category which offered a particularly difficult challenge to all actors involved in the sphere of women's rights. Some of the issues raised by reporting States at the current session would have to be addressed in special seminars. The former communist regimes had abused many of the measures and programmes advocated by the Committee to promote women's rights. For example, quotas for female participation in legislative bodies had been instituted, but since those bodies had been virtually powerless the whole system of quotas had been discredited. Likewise, women were increasingly turning inwards to their role as wives and mothers in response to attempts by the former regimes to meddle in family life and ideologize children. All non-governmental organizations in communist regimes had in fact been run by the Government; consequently such organizations in the post-communist era had a severe credibility problem. There was an urgent need to promote deeper understanding of the Convention among women in those countries, and specifically what the Convention could do for their rights as individuals.

9. Ms. CORTI said that, with reference to the countries in transition in Central and Eastern Europe, women seemed unable to organize themselves. The number of women's associations had declined drastically since the fall of communism. Instead women were concentrating on motherhood and family life. UNIFEM should avail itself of the advice and suggestions of the experts on the Committee.

10. Ms. ABAKA said that it was crucially important to involve members of the Committee in the Fund's work. The experts were even prepared to participate voluntarily in UNIFEM programmes. It was unfortunate that UNIFEM's presence in West Africa seemed to have diminished in recent years. The first reference she had heard to the UNIFEM programme in West Africa had been during the statement just delivered by the Fund's Director. It was also regrettable that she had not met the Fund's Director during the latter's recent visit to the region. Finally, given the expertise and commitment of African women's rights advocates, UNIFEM should organize a training workshop specifically for the African region.

11. Ms. OUEDRAOGO said that she had been unaware of the Fund's programme in West Africa and of the Director's visit to the region. As Ms. Abaka had said, the Committee members were prepared to share their knowledge of their own regions, particularly in the case of Africa, where the enormous economic and legal obstacles to the advancement of women made cooperation particularly important. Despite its limited budget, the Fund served as an important catalyst for change by adapting its strategies to the characteristics of specific regions.

12. For example, in her own country, Burkina Faso, the Fund could help by encouraging the Government to increase the woefully inadequate budgets of national agencies for the advancement of women, particularly with regard to the dissemination of the Convention, which was costly because of the country's numerous languages. She also noted that while European countries were able to provide women with a minimum package of services, that was not the case in Africa.

13. Ms. JAVATE DE DIOS said that, by making it possible for women activists to bring their knowledge of local situations to the Committee's work and to take the Committee's recommendations back to their own organizations, the Fund had made a fundamental contribution to the Committee's work. International law must be translated into practical action on behalf of women so that they could claim the Convention for their own as part of a culture of human rights.

14. While States parties were increasingly willing to discuss the sensitive and often hidden issue of violence against women, statistical information was often unsatisfactory. Furthermore, in many countries the provisions of the Convention were not invoked in the courts as a result of ignorance or discrimination on the part of judges and lawyers, for whom training programmes should be organized. Another problem was the frequent use of cultural and religious beliefs to justify violence against women. The Committee also needed to prepare general recommendations on affirmative action, refugee women and women migrant workers. She hoped that the Fund would be able to help the Committee to address some of those problems.

15. Ms. ACAR said that Ms. Schöpp-Schilling's remarks concerning the status of women in Eastern Europe were even more applicable to central Asia and the Caucasus. The periodic reports of countries such as Azerbaijan and Armenia had shown that women there were highly educated but had little contact with the outside world. There was a need for regional campaigns and workshops to familiarize those women with the concepts embodied in the Convention, thereby legitimating the idea of women's human rights.

16. Ms. AOUIJ expressed the hope that the Committee's partnership with NGOs would continue.

17. Noting that the Fund had been increasingly involved in addressing the economic consequences for women of structural adjustment, particularly in Africa, she asked what it was doing to give them greater access to technology so that they could start their own businesses, and how it was using international cooperation to promote the incorporation of a gender perspective into government policies. She also pointed out that there was a general tendency towards insufficient involvement of local experts in the visits of heads of United Nations agencies.

18. Ms. KING (Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women) said that the Fund's cooperation with other United Nations agencies was bearing fruit. As part of the Secretary-General's reform package, the new Department of Economic and Social Affairs would focus increasingly on technical cooperation in support of normative and analytical projects in the areas of economics, social issues, gender equality, human rights, ageing and disabilities. The Division for the Advancement of Women had a new Gender Advisory Services Unit composed of three Professionals with technical cooperation experience. However, the Division's primary partner would remain UNIFEM, whose work to empower women at the national level was a direct response to the Committee's wishes and the Beijing Platform for Action.

19. Among the Fund's achievements were its voluntary trust fund on violence against women, its support for studies and workshops for the promotion of women's human rights and its participation in the work of the Administrative Committee on Coordination, the Inter-Agency Committee on Women and Gender Equality and the High-level Committee on the Review of Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries which was one of the five executive committees that advised the Secretary-General on gender mainstreaming.

20. In future, both the Fund and the Division would endeavour to improve coordination with the Committee and to ensure that, when travelling on mission, their representatives were fully briefed on local situations and national experts.

21. The CHAIRPERSON said that UNIFEM was in a unique position to promote the universal ratification of the Convention, as had been achieved in the case of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Fund's incorporation of the Convention into its work had given the Committee visibility within the human rights system. She agreed that the Fund should avail itself of local experts, including Committee members, in its country initiatives.

22. She hoped that UNIFEM would be able to address the issues of increased violence against women, poverty, overemphasis on women's role as mothers, and promotion of traditional values as obstacles to their enjoyment of their rights. Since many States parties failed to implement the Committee's recommendations, she wondered whether the Fund could help to disseminate them to NGOs and policy makers in an effort to ensure that they were taken more seriously.

23. Ms. HEYZER (Director, United Nations Development Fund for Women) said that the Fund would act on the suggestions for the use of Committee members as resources at the regional level and the development of training programmes for judges and lawyers. Substantial financial and human resources had been the key to universal ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and she hoped that the Fund's resources could be used to promote implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

24. With regard to dissemination of the Committee's recommendations, the Division, which served as adviser to the resident coordinator system, would use that channel to promote better implementation of recommendations.

25. She apologized for not having met with Ms. Abaka during her recent visit to Ghana but explained that she had had only one day in which to resolve a number of logistical problems. The reduced visibility of UNIFEM was due to the fact that there had been no gender coordinator for the region over the past year; in addition, the Fund's adviser in Senegal was responsible for 23 countries. The forthcoming appointment of a gender coordinator for Ghana and Nigeria should ensure a stronger Fund presence in the region.

26. One example of the Fund's economic empowerment of women was its shea butter project in West Africa, which had helped women to become key economic players in a new global market through organization and training in business skills which had allowed them to eliminate the middleman and market their crop directly. As a result of that programme, the women's profit from shea butter nuts had risen from a few pennies to US$ 18 per kilo.

27. In closing, she thanked the Division for the Advancement of Women for working to improve cooperation between UNIFEM and all agencies of the United Nations system.

The meeting rose at 11.20 a.m.